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RELIGION AS A PROTECTIVE FACTOR IN THE SEVERITY OF CRIMES
COMMITTED BY JUVENILES WITH SEXUALLY OFFENDING BEHAVIOR

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Alex Laughrey
Religion as a Protective Factor in the
Severity of Crimes Committed by
Juveniles with Sexually Offending
Behaviors

ABSTRACT

Modest estimates would have that adolescents are involved in 20-33% of sexual assaults reported in the United States. Factors influencing recidivism have been studied, showing few patterns within socio-demographic data. Researchers have found that religious systems play an important role in encouraging social and moral norms. These findings are supported by work with incarcerated adult males who use faith-based interventions. Similarly, mere church affiliation also plays a role in the development of moral and social code. This study attempts to discover whether religion serves as a potential protective factor in the severity of crimes committed by juveniles with sexually offending behaviors. Multi-paged pencil and paper surveys were collected from 325 adjudicated juvenile sexual abusers. Of these youth, 179 (55%) reported sexual victimization as children while 146 (45%) said they had not been sexually abused. Findings showed that juvenile sexual offenders with religious affiliation were less likely to commit non-sexual crimes than their non-affiliated peers; however, propensity for sexual crime remained consistent between groups.

Religion as a potential protective factor in the severity of crimes committed by male juveniles with sexually offending behaviors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Juvenile Sexual Offending

Researchers using the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Incident Based Reporting System have indicated that approximately one out of every five sexual assaults, and one third of sexual assaults of children under twelve involve an offender under the age of eighteen (Snyder & Sickmund, 1996; Caldwell, 2002; Vizard, 2007). Thus adolescents are involved in 20- 33% of sexual assaults reported in the United States. Because several sources have concluded that 60% of sexual assaults are not reported (Koss, 1992; Catalano, 2005; RAINN, 2005), one can speculate that the actual rates of offense/offenses are much higher for all sexual offenders. For example, Becker, Harris, and Sales (1993) reported that in 1983 the Uniform Crime Report indicated that 20% of all reported forcible rapes were committed by individuals under the age of 18. This breaks down to 50 arrests of forcible rape per 100,000 adolescent males in this country. These same authors stated that this statistic may be only the tip of the proverbial iceberg because it accounts for rape and does not consider other sexual offenses. Burton and Meezan (2004) also report that recent statistics from the Federal Bureau of Investigation demonstrate that males under 18 account for 19.7% (n=8969) of arrests for sexual crime that do not include rape or prostitution and 16.4% (n=2312) of rape arrests.

In a study done by Vizard, Monck and Misch (2001) other demographics of juvenile sex offenders were explored. Sociodemographic data (family, ethnicity, and religion) show no

patterns in groupings (e.g. those that rape versus those that abuse children). When groupings are found, Becker, Harris, and Sales (1993) explain that it usually is because a view of the larger population is not being looked at, for example many researchers draw a general conclusion that the greatest number of offenses are committed by Caucasian males. This generalization is made without taking in effect that most likely there is a larger percentage of Caucasians in the general population. The demographics that are reported note that a high proportion of adolescents that sexually abuse have been reported as isolated from their peers, with poor relationships with family members, low academic performances, previous nonsexual delinquency, diagnosed learning disabilities, and lack of impulse control. (Becker, Harris, et al, 1993; Fagan & Wexler, 1988; Smith, Monastersky, et al, 1987; Vizard, Monck, et al, 2007).

Protective Factors

In a study by Bremer several protective factors were reported upon in regards to adolescents with sexually offending behaviors. She states that protective factors are the result of concrete events in a youth's life that provide resiliency (2006). Later she developed a protective factor scale which has been used to see if sex offenders are at high risk for reoffending.

Protective factors were as follows: behavior, offense characteristics, offense denial, social adjustment, emotional adjustment, cooperation, and family style. Further research on how religion plays a part in these protective factors is needed.

Religion

Religious institutions are important transmitters of values and norms. An explanation of how these get transmitted is offered by Hirschi and Stark (1969) via their Moral Communities' theory. The authors hypothesize that, people conform only if they are restrained by social bonds-meaning humans are only as moral as they are social (Lee, 2003).

Authors of other theories would go beyond social interactions and place more weight on the spiritual aspects of church affiliation or membership. To illustrate the point, Baier, using the US Census Data circa 2000 (Baier & Wright, 2001) found that violent crime rates are consistently lower where there are more churches per capita. Stark (1987) also discusses that this has remained consistent over time back to the 1920's.

According to Hirischi and Stark (1969), Davis said, "Religious sanctioning systems play an important role in ensuring and maintaining conformity to social norms" (Davis, 1948, as cited in Hirischi & Stark, 1969). Drawing heavily on the work of Emile Durkheim, (Yinger, 1957) the way in which religion performs this role is usually summarized as follows (1) through its belief system religion legitimates social and individual value; (2) through its rituals it reinforces commitment to these values; (3) through its system of eternal rewards and punishment, religion helps to insure the embodiment of values in actual behavior.

Exploring a group of adult males, half of whom were incarcerated for violent crimes, Armour, Aguilar, Windsor, and Taub (2008) found when inmates that were using faith based interventions were compared on their moral motivations with their counterparts not using faith based interventions, some important developments emerged. In a pilot study that involved both of these groups, on restorative justice practices, significant changes were found in the measured behaviors (i.e. empathy, perspective taking, forgiveness, proneness to forgive, daily spiritual experiences, and relationships with others) in the group that participated in the faith based program.

Church affiliation (e.g. even simple attendance) may also be important. Stark and Hirischi (1969) found that church attendance has some effect on the development of attitudes, apparently favorable to the obedience of the law in the general population. Stark (1987) went on

to independently determine that religious adolescents tend to have religious adolescents as friends. When most young people in a friendship network are religious, religious concerns may be amplified and made a valid and integral part of everyday interaction. In such communities, individual variations in religiousness come into play simply because individual commitment is energized by the group. Stark analogized this by conceiving of religion as a group property, saying that in ecological settings where the majority is religious, those religious people will be less prone to delinquency than nonreligious people. Still other authors have assumed that all criminal laws have roots in religious teachings and scriptures and those laws only vary in their secular support (Grismack, Kinsey, et al, 2001).

In a meta analysis of research with adolescents in the general population, as well as identified young offenders (including those who had committed sexual offenses), Lipsey and Derzon (1998) noted the lack of involvement in social activities was a robust risk factor for violent offending. As a validating example of salient research, Cottle, Lee and, Heilbrun (2001) reported a low but significant correlation between social isolation and criminal reoffending in follow up research with adolescents and young adults (aged 12 to 21 years). Research on adolescent sexual offenders also supports this theory. For example, Langstorm and Grann (2000) found that adolescents with limited social contacts were more than three times more likely to be reconvicted for a sexual crime after a follow up period of five years. In addition Kenny et al (2001) found that adolescents who displayed poor social skills and who had weak relationships with peers were more likely to be sexual assault recidivists than adolescents charged for the first time.

Religion and sexual offending

There is very little research on religion and sexual offending. However in one study, Stack and Kanavy's (2001) structural analysis of forcible rape committed by adult males, Catholicism, marked by high religious integration/regulation, reduces the rate of rape. Controlling for numerous conditions drawn from the prominent criminological theories, not only did Catholicism remain a significant predictor of rape rates, but it was also the most important predictor of such rates.

Thusly, in the current project then I will seek to answer the following question: is religion a protective factor in the severity of crimes committed by male adolescent offenders?

METHODS

Once consents were obtained, confidential data were collected from youth in 6 residential facilities in a Midwestern state. The initial sample included both sex and non-sexual offenders; data for this research focused only on the adjudicated sexual offenders. Multi-paged pencil and paper surveys were collected from 325 adjudicated juvenile sexual abusers. Of these youth, 179 (55%) reported sexual victimization as children while 146 (45%) said they had not been sexually abused. While multiple measures of victimization experience were available, this determination was made through simply asking if the youth were sexually abused as children. Although behaviorally descriptive measures may have been best for such a determination; however because it was assumed that not all abused boys would respond to a more detailed question affirmatively this more simple method was chosen as a conservative method of discrimination.

The average age of the sample (N=325) was 16.60 years (SD=1.65). The average academic grade was the 9th grade (SD=1.64 grades). Racial composition was distributed in the following way: 47% of respondents identifying themselves as Caucasian, 26% identifying

themselves as African American, 21% selected “other” while 6% did not make any race selection.

Included in the paper and pencil surveys were three specific questions about religion; youths responded using a Likert scale format. Those three questions were: “before you were arrested how important was religion in your life”, “since you were arrested how important is religion in your life”, and “during the year prior to your arrest how often did you attend religious services and/or gatherings”. The surveys also collected data on sexual aggression through the use of the Self Report Sexual Aggression Scale (SERSA) which was used in prior studies (Burton, Miller & Shill, 2002; Burton, 2003). The scale measures sexually aggressive over the lifespan. Questions about several sexual acts are all prefaced with “Have you ever conned or forced someone to...? The original several page surveys were reduced to two pages for this study based on collapsed variables used in previous projects. This instrument is essentially a checklist of relationships and acts. The instrument’s reliability was ascertained with a previous 8-week test-retest agreement of 96%, with a small sample (Burton, 2000)

Elliot, Huizinga and Ageton’s (1985) Self Reported Delinquency Measure (SRD) was used to assess delinquency. The scale has 32 questions that used a 7 point frequency scale. The instrument has several subscales including General Delinquency, Property Damage, Public Disorderly, Felony Assault, Felony Theft, Robbery, Alcohol Use, Drug Use, and Selling Drugs. However, for the purposes of this research, the scales were collapsed to create a Non-Violent Crime subscale and a Violent Crime subscale. All of the subscales have acceptable to good internal consistency in this study. Cronbach’s alphas on the nine SRD subscales range from .63 (Violent Crime) to .91 (Total Delinquency)

FINDINGS

Just over thirty seven percent of the youth stated that religion was between not very important or that they were neutral on the question while about 29% of the youth stated that religion was between neutral and very important to them in the year prior to their arrest.

Table 1: Response to: *Before you were arrested how important was religion in your life?*

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Not very Important	98	29.8
2	25	7.6
Neutral	111	33.7
4	42	12.8
Very Important	53	16.1
Total	329	100.0

In Table 2 respondents indicated that only 22% did not attend religious services in the year prior to their arrest. The remaining youth (about 78%) indicated that in the year prior to their arrest they attended religious services or gathering between several times per year (perhaps for holidays) to several times per week.

Table 2: Response to: *During the year prior to your arrest how often did you attend religious services and or gatherings?*

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Several times a week	83	25.4
Once a week	52	15.9
Once or twice a month	64	19.6
Several times a year	55	16.8
Never	73	22.3
Total	327	100.0

Contrary to literature based understanding, importance of religion and attendance at religious services or gatherings were not related to characteristics of sexual crime (see Table 3).

Table 3: Correlations between religious and sexual crimes variables

		Importance of religion	Attendance at religious services	Total Force ¹	Total Number of Victims	Severity of Sexual Crimes ²
Importance of religion	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.471**	.011	-.032	.018
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.865	.571	.768
	N	329	324	245	309	269
Attendance at religious services	Pearson Correlation	-.471**	1.000	.000	.007	.003
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.995	.909	.961
	N	324	327	243	309	270
Total Force	Pearson Correlation	.011	.000	1.000	.217**	.167*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.865	.995		.001	.010
	N	245	243	247	243	234
Total Number of Victims	Pearson Correlation	-.032	.007	.217**	1.000	.221**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.571	.909	.001		.000
	N	309	309	243	312	267
Severity of Sexual Crimes	Pearson Correlation	.018	.003	.167*	.221**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.768	.961	.010	.000	
	N	269	270	234	267	271

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

In table 4 however, it is clear that importance of religion and attending services and gatherings is quite correlated to many nonsexual crimes.

¹ Total Force: 1=games, 2=threats, 3=games and threats, 4=force, 5=force and games, 6= force and threats, 7= force and games and threats.

² Offense severity score; 1= voyeurism, 2= fondling, 3= fondling and voyeurism, 4= penetration (of any sort), 5= penetration and voyeurism, 6= penetration and fondling, 7= penetration, voyeurism and fondling.

Table 4. Correlations of religious affiliation and non-sexual crime.

		Importance of religion	Attendance at religious services	General Delinquency	Prop Damage	Felony Theft	Public Disorderly	Alcohol	Drugs	Robbery	Felony Assault	Sell drugs
Importance of religion	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.471**	-.170**	-.107	-.162**	-.089	-.144*	-.174**	-.065	-.052	-.115
	Sig. (2- tailed)		.000	.004	.067	.006	.127	.014	.003	.270	.371	.051
	N	329	324	283	297	289	292	291	286	294	294	291
Attendance at religious services	Pearson Correlation	-.471**	1.000	.125*	.075	.104	.089	.104	.113	.053	.022	.086
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.000		.036	.196	.079	.132	.078	.056	.368	.709	.145
	N	324	327	282	296	288	291	290	286	293	293	291
General Delinquency	Pearson Correlation	-.170**	.125*	1.000	.649**	.700**	.635**	.522**	.553**	.578**	.609**	.473**
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.004	.036		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	283	282	286	281	281	282	281	277	284	282	282
Prop Damage	Pearson Correlation	-.107	.075	.649**	1.000	.698**	.521**	.438**	.508**	.504**	.561**	.348**
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.067	.196	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	297	296	281	300	286	289	288	283	291	292	288
	Pearson Correlation	-.162**	.104	.700**	.698**	1.000	.590**	.578**	.580**	.718**	.669**	.534**

Felony Theft	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	.079	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	289	288	281	286	292	287	286	283	290	287	287
Public Disorderly	Pearson Correlation	-.089	.089	.635**	.521**	.590**	1.000	.449**	.573**	.588**	.534**	.326**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.127	.132	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	292	291	282	289	287	295	289	286	293	289	290
Alcohol	Pearson Correlation	-.144*	.104	.522**	.438**	.578**	.449**	1.000	.676**	.585**	.559**	.609**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.014	.078	.000	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	291	290	281	288	286	289	294	284	292	289	289
Drugs	Pearson Correlation	-.174**	.113	.553**	.508**	.580**	.573**	.676**	1.000	.564**	.592**	.587**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.056	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	286	286	277	283	283	286	284	289	288	285	285
Robbery	Pearson Correlation	-.065	.053	.578**	.504**	.718**	.588**	.585**	.564**	1.000	.615**	.562**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.270	.368	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	294	293	284	291	290	293	292	288	297	291	292
	Pearson	-.052	.022	.609**	.561**	.669**	.534**	.559**	.592**	.615**	1.000	.577**

Felony Assault	Correlation											
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.371	.709	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	294	293	282	292	287	289	289	285	291	297	290
Sell drugs	Pearson Correlation	-.115	.086	.473**	.348**	.534**	.326**	.609**	.587**	.562**	.577**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.051	.145	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	291	291	282	288	287	290	289	285	292	290	294

DISCUSSION

There is little previous literature on the intersection of religion and how it may serve as a protective factor for crimes committed by juvenile with sexually offending behaviors. Due this factor, religion among adults, adults with criminal behaviors, adults with sexually offending behaviors, juveniles, juveniles with criminal behavior, and lastly the small amount of literature surrounding juveniles with sexually offending behavior were reviewed above.

The findings in the current study do not appear to match the above referenced literature. Contrary to expectations religion is not correlated to a decrease in number or severity of sexual crimes. However, in prior literature religion is negatively correlated to non sexual crimes (Baier & Wright, 2001; Lee, 2003) This possibly could be that other crimes are more social in nature and as Hirschi and Stark (1969) state we are only as moral as we are social. Religious youth may associate with other religious youth and be less likely to commit non- violent offenses such as shoplifting, selling of drugs, drunkenness, etc. Prior researchers often report that youth are more likely to commit delinquent acts if they perceive these acts will be admired or accepted by peers (Hoge, Andrews, & Laschied, 1994; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnsworth, & Jang, 1994). Adolescents also report an increase in admiration and acceptance for delinquent acts to be increased, and favored over “conventional” activities or skills.

Further, religious youth may further have more opportunity to engage in conventional activities and exposure to non-deviant peers on a regular basis, especially if they are attending religious service or youth-related activities. Religious group activities may also support the work of Dishion, McCord, and Poulin (1999) in reducing “deviance

training” by creating groups of youth that are at low-, medium-, and high-risk for delinquency. Or perhaps they are simply more inhibited in their behaviors as they view consequences and think of moral consequences of crime. One can argue that violent crimes are often solitary acts and social interaction may not have as much standing when deciding to perpetrate one of these offenses.

Limitations

This study was limited by using sexual offenders from one Midwestern state. The data was self reported and not other reports were utilized. To aid in future analyses, a larger sample, from varying geographic populations should be included. Also, religious measure was three simple questions. A more in depth section on religion may provide more information.

Implications for research and practice

A better relationship between religion and spirituality and how people self define in this area could be further examined to aid in future analysis and study in this area. Despite religion not being found as a factor in the severity of crimes committed by juvenile sex offenders, a further understanding of how people define religion in their lives may show different results.

The findings listed above show that a large number of offenders did attend church before they were arrested. In looking at treatment options and facility programming it should be noted that religion may provide a comfort or source of solace and help further treatment.

Education also needs to be provided to potential therapists and people providing intervention in this area as noted above that religion does play a part in less non violent crimes committed.

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